

Nature stories for young readers

AND SHE SHOWED THE WAY



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VIDYA AND RAJARAM SHARMA

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The story is based on observations made at a residential campus in South Delhi during the months of June - July 2013 and May - June 2017.

Peahen made her nest on 26 June and took her chicks away on 28 July.

Photographs in this book may not show the actual size of birds or their nests.



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I got up with a start. Woken up by high pitched non-stop *peep... peep... peep...* calls. I ran out into the balcony and was shocked at what I saw.

"She is abandoning them! She is abandoning them," I screamed.

"Shhh," said Lady Blue Rock Pigeon

"Keep quiet," whispered Mr. Blue Rock Pigeon.





The *peep... peeps* continued, louder and more frantically. All three of them hopelessly panicking. Two of them dangerously positioned at the edge of the sunshade looking down and wondering why their mother had deserted them.

I watched in horror. What if chicks falls down? Down to the ground below!

Peahen, their mother, panicked too. In less than a couple of seconds, she made a hasty graceless flight back, gathered her three chicks beneath her and squatted as





though nothing had happened.

"Phew!" I said, relieved.

Ours is a row of houses, with a ground and first floor, all facing a compound which separates our campus from the wilderness in our neighbouring campus. Both campuses are home to very many birds. Including peacocks and pigeons. Pigeons live with us in our homes and buildings, occupying ledges, window sills, overhangings, niches and even light domes. Where ever possible or where ever we allow them to be.





Peacocks and peahens -- they keep to themselves and hesitate to come near us. The bravest they get is in winters when they walk all over our garden to eat up leaves, especially radish leaves.

Strangely, Peahen was different. With no hesitation whatsoever, she was occupying my neighbour's sunshade for more than a month now! The sunshade of the first floor room window!

It all started one fine day in June. Peahen examined sunshades in our houses and decided she liked my

neighbour's house the best. Now, this sunshade had been home to Mr. and Lady Blue Rock Pigeon for as long as I could remember. They would rest there, roost there and nest there. But it did not matter at all to Peahen. Without even bothering to take permission, she helped herself to all the sticks and twigs Mr. Pigeon had collected for Lady Pigeon to build their nest. Rearranging them, quite carelessly about her, she simply declared that she would nest on that sunshade. Poor Mr. and Lady Pigeon. I don't know if they were unhappy about it or not.

As I looked on, Peahen made a second attempt. Up she





got up, walked slowly to the edge of the sunshade and in one quick movement, flew right down to the road.

"There she goes again!" I screamed again.

"QUIET!"

That was Father Red Wattled Lapwing! Asking me to be quiet! I stared open mouth at him, shocked beyond surprise. On the rooftop he stood, as tall as he could. Watching out for any possible danger to his chicks.





The chicks, two of them, were roaming around in the garden at the far end of the road. Mother Lapwing was with them, but from there on the ground, she did not have the much needed 'bird's-eye view'.

Red Wattled Lapwings as a rule don't have time for others. Especially when they have chicks to look after. And here he was, admonishing me! Father Lapwing noticed my confusion and said rather sternly, "Let her be, she knows what she is doing."

"You mean walk away from her chicks?"

Father Lapwing had said all he could possibly say and showed no further interest in me. Now it was up to me to find out what Peahen was planning to do.

I had got accustomed to Peahen squatting almost in the same position incubating her eggs. Four large, not too shiny, cream coloured eggs. Mouth open to cool herself, her little tongue going up and down she sat alert at all times, though she would doze off once in a while. At first she would take off late in the evening to return early the next morning. But soon she was on her eggs almost the entire day and night. She sat there without food and water.





Even the little food my neighbour threw onto the sunshade was mostly left untouched. And she never spoke a word to anybody, not even to the Blue Rock Pigeons.

Day before yesterday, I caught sight, for the first time, of a peachick. Oh, how cute it was! Peaking from beneath Peahen's huge wings! Soon it got more adventurous. Jumping all over the place, over Peahen, onto the ledge, pulling and tugging at Peahen's feathers and crest and generally having a wonderful time. I got to see the second chick yesterday in the morning and the third, later in the evening. But no fourth chick!





All of a sudden, Peahen seemed to be having other plans. Down she was on the road, looking up at her chicks. Did she want to get away from them? Now... after all these days? Or did she want them to follow her? But how? I could not say.

What is she up to?" I asked surprised and a bit worried.

"Showing them the way. Way to go, of course. It's about time," said Mr. Blue Rock Pigeon calmly.

Go! Look, they are so small. How can they go? I know

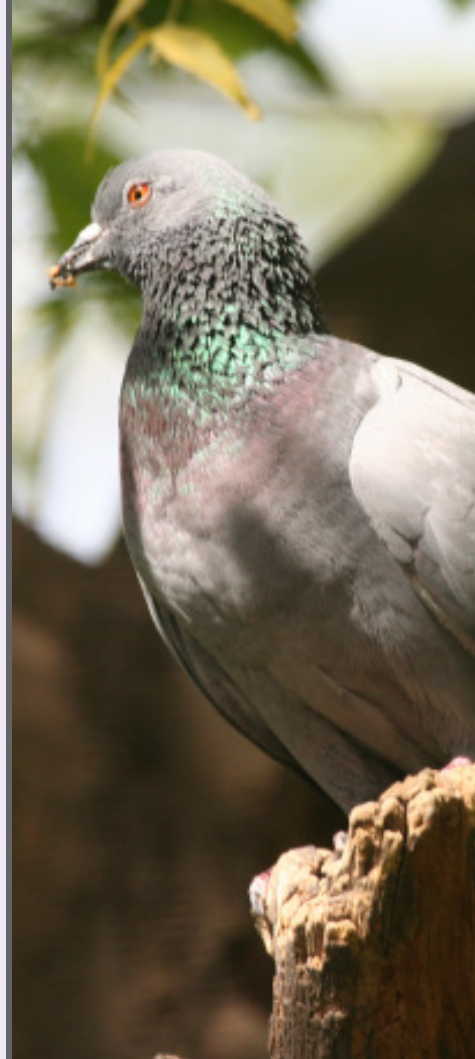
Peahen left you homeless... but... how can you be so selfish?" I asked in desperation.

"Selfish! Me? What are you talking about? They have to go. Just like the Lapwings," he said, again very calmly.

"Lapwings?" I asked puzzled.

"Yes, like our rooftop Red Wattled Lapwing chicks," said Lady Blue Rock Pigeon.

"Red Wattled Lapwings? Rooftop?" What is Pigeon





talking about? I wondered.

"They are all ground nesters. Lapwings and peahens," said Lady Pigeon, almost talking to herself.

"WHAT?"

"The only difference is lapwings nest in the open but peahens choose thickets with ample ground cover to –"

"WHAT?" I had seen plenty of lapwing's nests and knew all about them.

Their eggs look like stones and are well camouflaged in their nest. So also their chicks, camouflaged perfectly. True, this was the first time I had seen a peahen nesting. But neither the eggs nor the chicks were anything but camouflaged! Besides, if peahens are ground nesters, what is she doing here?

"... so that they can lead their chicks away as soon as they are dry and ready to walk. Away to where they can find food. But... now... where are safe open grounds and where are the thickets?" She continued, with a tinge of anger in her voice.





I was beginning to understand Lady Pigeon. I knew how important it was to select a good nesting site. Birds put in a lot of energy and effort in building nests and protecting their eggs and chicks. Many a times however they are not lucky. Especially in urban places.

One day there is a bush, the next day it is trimmed. One day there is a tree, the next day one of its branches with a nest in it is cut off. One day there is a lot of grass and undergrowth in an unused space, the next day it is all cleared up in a cleanliness drive! How can birds nest when such changes keep happening? What about stray dogs?

Their numbers forever increasing! Do ground nesters have a chance? It all looked very sad to me.

"Cheer up! That's not the end of the world. They have learnt a few tricks too!" Said Mr. Blue Rock Pigeon good humouredly. "It's called adaptation."

That's when I learnt that the Red Wattled Lapwing pair had nested on my other neighbour's sloping roof. And that they have been doing so for years. Many Red Wattled Lapwings are now 'elevated' nesters! Just like Peahen, they also warm their eggs for about a month, 28 days usually.





And rooftops are safe undisturbed place for their eggs.

“Oh! Now I understand!” I exclaimed and told the Pigeons how puzzled and surprised I was to see Lapwing chicks in the garden below. I had become somewhat of an expert at detecting nests but though I had heard them making nesting calls on the rooftops, I never imagined they had nested there!

“Yes... yes... Clever! Are they not?” Asked Lady Pigeon.

Rooftop nesters need to think of a plan to get their chicks





down soon, so that they can be led to find food. All I had to do was be quiet, not disturb Peahen or her chicks and wait patiently to see what happens next. To see how peachicks would get down, a complete floor and more. For the Lapwing chicks -- from the rooftop -- it would be ground plus first floor. A real huge leap below! How do they do it? Must be very risky of course.

Minutes rolled by. One complete hour passed. And in this time, Peahen had made SIXTEEN trips down and back! Down she would go, perhaps demonstrating, and the minute she was gone, chicks would panic and start calling





out as loudly as they could. *Cluck... cluck...* she would say from below, gently urging her chicks. But they stayed put adamantly. She would look at her chicks, look at all of us, some six of us watching her anxiously from the balcony. Helpless as she was, she could do nothing but return. Most times it would be a hurried, clumsy return. Once she lost her balance and seemed very angry with herself. How tiring it must have been for her?

“Oh... LOOK!” I screamed, in spite of myself.

A chick was down! Almost accidentally. It happened in a

twinkle of the eye. Down it landed on the grass, safe and sound. A small success. But a cause for more worry. Torn between the chick below and the chicks above, Peahen's anxiety only increased. Luckily for her the second chick made bold and jumped down neatly after a few minutes. A half jump and a half flying down!

Then trouble started all over again. Peahen did not budge from her two chicks and the last chick did not jump down. There were lots of *cluck... cluck* from the mother and lot more *peep... peep* from the solitary chick above. Each calling the other in desperation. With Peahen out of the





way, we quickly used a ladder and brought the third chick down.

With great relief, we watched, as Peahen walked out. Her three chicks trying hard to keep pace with her and following her as closely as they could. They walked out of the compound, out of the gate and into the wilderness in our neighbouring campus.

As for the fourth remaining egg, it became a keepsake, to remind us, always, of how she perseveringly showed the way!





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